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HILL, LEWIS AND PLEAS FAMILIES

by Maurice Hill
Edited by Ralph Lea & Janice Roth

▲ *In the Sitting Room (officially, the Dining Room) of the Hill House; l-r: G.W. Hill, Daisy M. Pleas, Maurice Hill, Mrs. G.W. Hill, circa 1907.* *Photo by Nellie Hill*

George Washington Hill was born in Brownfield, Maine. His date of birth is not known, but was probably about 1840. He was one of the first passengers when the railroad came to Mokelumne (now Lodi) in 1869. At that time no passenger cars were available so he, along with other men, had to make their headquarters in the baggage cars. No doubt the men came with lunches to supplement food obtained at towns where the train stopped.

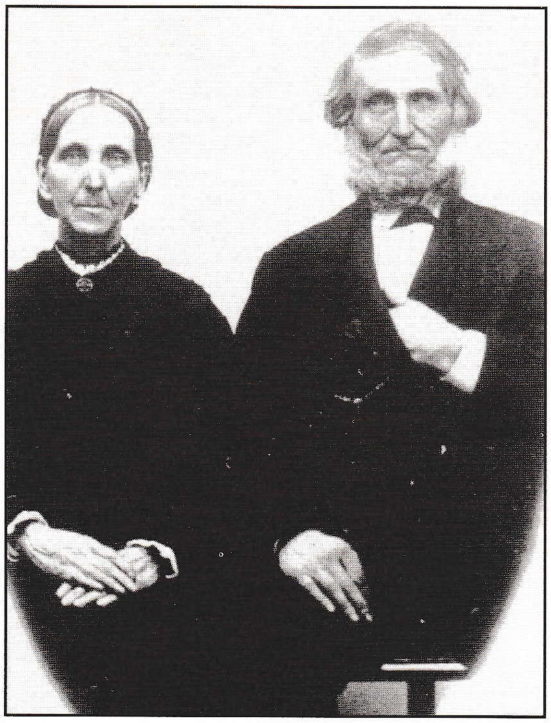
George Hill arrived in Mokelumne in the fall of 1869. His brother Isaac J. Hill was either here first or arrived soon after. Another brother, William, the oldest of seven, also came to Mokelumne, but went on to the Oregon country and was never heard from again.

George and Isaac "batched" together at first. By 1870, Mr. Hill had set up a jewelry store and watch repair shop. He had learned this trade at the Waltham Factory and had become a skilled watchmaker.

George Hill was upon the local scene when Lodi, known as Mokelumne or Mokelumne Station, was founded as a town in 1869. Through the years he saw Lodi grow from a village of a few scattered buildings to a small city.

On March 14, 1875 at the age of seventeen, Mary Lewis married George W. Hill, who had already become an established jeweler in Lodi. Their first home was a two-story house set back from the street on the southeast corner of Pine and School Streets. Part of the building

▲ *Mary and George Hill's wedding picture.*



▲ *Mr. & Mrs. William Hill, parents of George W. Hill.*

was used as a jewelry store while the remaining portion served as living quarters.

Mary E. Hill was said to have been the handsomest girl in Lodi when she was a young lady. She evidently took after her mother, who had been called San Joaquin County's best looking woman.

At the time she was married, Mary knew very little about cooking and it has been told that George taught her how to cook. Mary was not like George, who was always reserved and businesslike. She was an extremely vivacious person, socially inclined and with a great affection for people. In return her friends were numerous.

Between 1877 and 1879, Mr. Hill built a one-story brick building on Sacramento Street just north of the northwest corner of Pine and Sacramento Streets. This building was divided into two sections, the north half and the rear part of the south side served as the family home while the remaining section was occupied by the jewelry store. It was here that Nellie Etta Hill, the Hills' first child, was born.

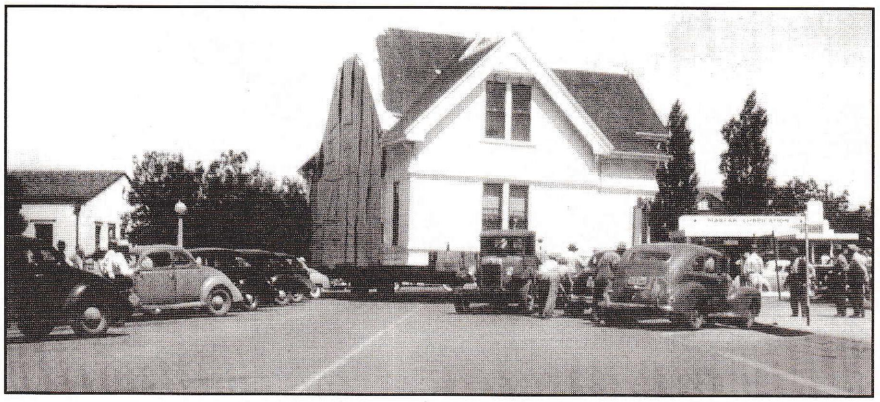
In the mid 1880's the family bought a home on South School Street. Here they resided until 1902 at which time the family moved into their new home at the same location. Mr. Hill was the architect for this home and even went to great pains to build a good-sized model of the house, complete in every detail. For a number of years this museum piece remained in the storeroom of the new two-story brick business building which was constructed in 1888 after the destructive fire of 1887. After keeping the house model until he tired of looking at it, Mr. Hill broke it up for kindling wood.

Mrs. Hill (nee Mary Lewis) was born in Michigan, coming to California via the Isthmus of Panama when she was eight years of age. Mary's mother (Mrs. Philander Lewis) became a widow when her husband died after being captured by the Confederate forces and imprisoned at Andersonville, Georgia. Mrs. Lewis had three children to raise by herself, Zaidee (born February 14, 1856), Mary (born July 1, 1857) and a son, George born in 1862.

While far away in California a man named Silas Husted Pleas (son of Obediah Jackson Pleas and Isabella Husted Pleas) heard about a young widow (Mrs. Lewis) with three small children living near Ann Arbor, Michigan. Silas had lost his wife and two children. He was an early immigrant to California, arriving in 1852 and San Joaquin County in 1858. Silas was a school teacher for a while and was also a rural preacher, preaching at the old Harmony Grove Church on occasion.

Silas Pleas now owned 260 acres of land north of the Mokelumne River. His ranch began on the northwest side of what is now the Mokelumne River Bridge located on the 99 Highway. The property

▲ *Freeman Pleas & George Lewis, half-brothers.*



▲ *Moving the front section of the Hill House, 115 S. School Street, May 26, 1948.*

George Washington Hill (Lodi's first jeweler). This picture was taken by Nellie Hill, May 1, 1910, in front of the Hill home, 115 S. School St., Lodi. G.W. Hill is wearing his Knight Templar's uniform.

Isaac and Samuel Hill, twin brothers of G.W. Hill pictured at the Hill residence.

Daisy Pleas.

extended north to Woodbridge Road and then west to the railroad track.

After having heard about the widow, Silas journeyed to Michigan in order to meet and get acquainted with Mrs. Lewis. Romance bloomed and Mary Jane Johnson Lewis became Mrs. Silas Pleas. He moved the family to California and settled in a roomy farmhouse on the ranch.

In his early years of farming Silas grew wheat, but later turned to the raising of watermelons, a product which made Lodi famous as the watermelon center.

Mr. Pleas was well known as a hospitable host. In the early days, travelers were hard-put to find suitable accommodations, but those who came to the door of the Pleas home always found a welcome with food and shelter.

Mrs. Pleas was a busy woman in those early days. She had the task of feeding not only her family, but the hired help which came to work for Mr. Pleas. Another chore was making soap for their household to use.

Mr. and Mrs. Silas Pleas were also the parents of three daughters: Daisy Marilla Pleas born February 19, 1872; Linda Rosa Jane Pleas born September 19, 1875; Liby May (Lillian) Pleas born March 15, 1878; and a son Silas Freeman Pleas born in 1868.

The hard life as a wife of a pioneer farmer took its toll and Mrs. Pleas passed away from tuberculosis on August 12, 1883 before her 47th birthday. Unfortunately, George Lewis, as a result of the grueling farm duties, also contracted tuberculosis and passed away on March 30, 1888 at the age of 26. His half-brother, Silas Freeman Pleas, passed away for the same reason on February 15, 1890 before his 23rd birthday.

Zaidee Lewis married Luther Runyon of Tulare County on September 5, 1875. Zaidee and Luther had seven children and spent their entire married life on their ranch a few miles from Visalia.

After Mr. Silas Pleas passed away in 1885, Mr. William John Rixon became guardian of the three Pleas daughters. Mrs. George Hill took her half-sister, Daisy, to live with her family, while Mr. and Mrs. Rixon cared for Linda and Mr. and Mrs. Keagle took Lillian for awhile. Later, the Rixon's took charge of Lillian.

Linda Pleas married William Reid Wells on November 6, 1895 in Tulare County. They had one son and three daughters and lived for many years on a farm northeast of Visalia.

Lillian Pleas married Arthur Cunningham in 1901 in Sacramento. Mr. Cunningham was, at this time, the star of the Tivoli Opera House in San Francisco. Lillian was also a member of the opera company. They appeared in numerous productions at the Tivoli up to the time of the 1906 earthquake. After the fire, Mr. Cunningham spent the remainder of his life in the theatre playing all over the United States. Arthur passed away on June 3, 1944. His wife remained a widow for three years, then married Mr. Clarence Rees in 1947. He was an old friend and a one-time theatrical man. Lillian passed away in the fall of 1964 followed by Mr. Reese in the winter of 1969.

Daisy Marilla Pleas never married. After joining the Hill family she attended Lodi schools and while in school she began to spend time at her brother-in-law's jewelry store. There she learned the watch making

▲ *The Hill House, 1913; Mary Hill, Linda Wells, Lillian Cunningham and Daisy Pleas.*

business and began to work at the store full time after completing the ninth grade. During the ensuing years, salesmen who came to the store were amazed to find a female watchmaker in the business. As far as is known, she was California's first female watchmaker. Her business career in Lodi probably established a record, for it extended from 1890 to 1950, a period of 60 years.

When she retired from the jewelry store, Daisy Marilla Pleas was very active in the Lodi Methodist Church, both in the choir and as a Sunday school teacher. She also served as head of the local Native Daughters of the Golden West Lodge. Daisy Pleas passed away in Lodi on November 20, 1960.

George and Mary Hill had two children, Nellie Etta Hill born in 1883 and Maurice Schussler Hill born in 1900. Nellie was a bright child and physically active until she had a severe accident at the age of three. She was sitting in a child's rocking chair on the back porch of the house, and in rocking back and forth, the chair suddenly lurched forward throwing her to the ground. As a result, curvature of the spine set in, and although many methods were used to prevent its progress, including laying flat on her back for the most part of several years, the procedures were only partially successful. Nellie attended Salem grammar school off and on and also was a piano pupil of the late Ida A. Gowe, a Lodi piano teacher.

Nellie was of diminutive size being no taller than a child of 10. She was always proud of her small feet which took a size 2 shoe.

Her initial accident was not her only one. When she was nine years old she fell down the stairs of the barn loft. In this unfortunate accident her nose was broken. In spite of her frail condition, Nellie became a good-looking young lady with large brown eyes and an abundant supply of dark hair which reached below her waist.

Nellie was a very talented person. She not only sang and played the piano, but was a composer as well. One of her songs, "The Soldier's Farewell" is believed to be the first musical composition published by a local person. This song

▲ *Daisy Marilla Pleas, graduation picture (1890) Salem School, Lodi, California.*

appeared in 1905. Nellie wrote poetry, painted and was an excellent photographer. She developed, printed and tinted her own photos.

Nellie was known to have a happy disposition, and was popular among her many friends. She took part in various entertainments. On one occasion she posed in a Japanese costume at the local opera house. She joined the Eastern Star Lodge and Native Daughters and was active in the Epworth League of the Methodist Church. Nellie, Mary and Daisy all sang in the choir at the Methodist Church.

Nellie and her brother, Maurice, appeared at the Knights of Pythias Lodge and sang "Red Wing" while dressed in Indian costumes which Nellie had made including the beadwork on both costumes.

Nellie passed away on January 30, 1912, at the age of 29.

Maurice, the second child of George and Mary Hill, was born 17 years after his sister, Nellie. He attended Emerson Grammar School. While in the fifth grade he began to take piano lessons from Mrs. Alice McCall.

At first, George Hill objected to his son's piano lessons, but when Maurice's talent became obvious, he consented. After a time, Maurice studied piano with Mr. Ernest West, who was the organist of the Methodist Church.

After his first year at Lodi High his way of life was completely changed. Mr. Seaten, president of the College of the Pacific at San Jose, was in Lodi and heard of the budding pianist. Mr. Seaten explained to the Hills the advantages in a course of study at the College of the

Lillian Pleas. ▶

Mrs. G.W. Hill and Nellie Hill, September 15, 1909; Lodi, California. ▲

◀ *Nellie Etta Hill, daughter of Mr. & Mrs. George W. Hill, Lodi, California; at about age 3, 1885.*

▲ *Maurice Hill, September 1908, munching on a Lodi melon. Photo taken by Nellie Hill.*

Pacific Conservatory of Music, and prevailed on them to allow Maurice to register for the next term. He left Lodi in 1917 and took piano from Warren D. Allen and eight Conservatory subjects from Howard H. Hanson. During his study at San Jose, Maurice's compositions were featured on some of the Conservatory programs. He took part in several concerts by playing piano, composing music and even composing a little opera "Geraldine," named after the famous opera singer, Geraldine Harrar. In 1919 Maurice played the part of a poet, one of two male leads in a college musical titled, "The Romance Rose" by Don Richards of San Jose.

After two years at the Conservatory, Maurice returned to Lodi High School and graduated with his class in 1920. A year later, while starting his fourth year of college, Maurice was forced to leave college due to an extended illness. After he recovered Maurice went to Oakland for six years and studied with the widely known composer and theorist, William J. McCoy. He appeared in several piano recitals over radio stations KTAB and KPO. He also taught piano at this time.

In 1929, Maurice returned to Lodi and later toured Hawaii with his mother Mary and Aunt Daisy. Inspired by the tropical beauty of the islands, Maurice wrote his first book of poems, "The Golden Shower," which was published by the Honolulu Star-Bulletin. From this time on, Maurice wrote many poems which were printed in poetry journals and numerous newspapers. He won a number of prizes for some of these poems, but did not write professionally until 1934, shortly after his mother's death. His poems were published in Love Story Magazine, Christian Science Monitor, Child Life, Jack & Jill, and The Grade Teacher.

During these years, Maurice was awarded honorary membership to two noted societies, the Eugene Field Society and the Mark Twain Society. Both societies bestow honorary membership to poets and authors who have distinguished themselves in their chosen fields. Maurice published his second book of poems, "Follow the Compass," in 1937.

Maurice traveled extensively, usually with his mother and Aunt Daisy, going to Alaska in 1927 and Europe in 1930 and returning to Hawaii in 1933. Daisy and Maurice returned to Alaska in 1935 and to Europe in 1938 after his mother's death.

In 1938 Maurice enrolled in a course of art at the College of the Pacific in Stockton. He followed this course of study for three years producing several hundred paintings and drawings. He exhibited his paintings at the Grape Festival art show and elsewhere.

Maurice also appeared several times as pianist-composer on the Helen Viola Bush Radio Show, which was popular many years ago.

In 1948, the business district of Lodi was expanding to such a degree

◀ *1920; Maurice Hill at graduation from Lodi Union High School.*

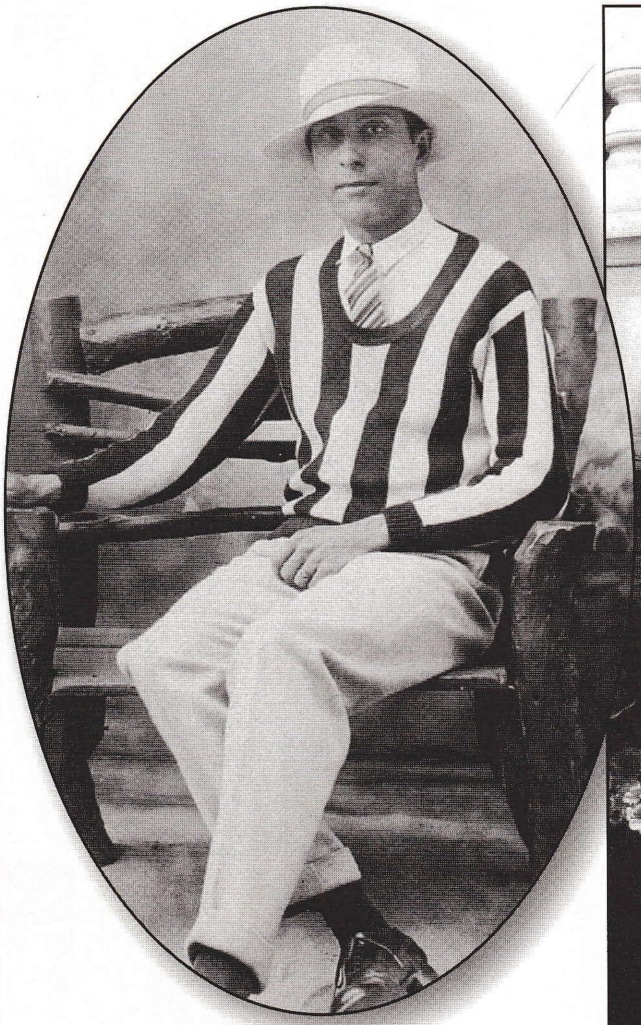
▲ *Maurice Hill with a string of fish and his sports car.*

that School Street was now the main business district of town. Homes were no longer welcome there so in 1948, Maurice gave in and sold the property to Woolworth Co., but moved the house to 826 South Church Street. Dave Fitzsimmons moved the house in two sections to its present location. In 1950, Maurice sold the Hill Jewelry Store to Charles Kroll.

Maurice became interested in the history of Lodi in 1950 and began to do extensive research work. His information came from many sources but mainly through the study of old newspapers at the Sacramento State Library and the libraries at Stockton and Lodi. He also interviewed old-timers and perused county histories.

In 1973, he began writing the chapters for a book on Lodi history. The work was fascinating, but Maurice was handicapped by the onset of glaucoma. Maurice Hill passed away in March of 1984, before

▲ *Nellie Hill with "Bubbie" – February 14, 1910 in Lodi.* *Photo taken by Maurice Hill.*



▲ *Maurice Hill, August 30, 1925, Santa Cruz, CA.*

▲ *Nellie Hill, Lodi, California; probably 1906.*

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completing his history of Lodi. He willed his house and its contents as a museum in memory of his family.

The Hill House Museum is now an established non-profit corporation and works closely with the Lodi Historical Society in its preservation. The Hill House Museum is furnished using Hill family items that Maurice had the foresight to save. Most of the period furniture in the house belonged to the Hills. Although by moving the house in 1948, Maurice was forced to bring it "up to code," the house retains an early 1900's feel and gives one a chance to step back in time.

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